

At the Pistol's Point

by Seward W. Hopkins.

CHAPTER I.

Is It the Shadow of Tragedy?

I was early in my career for me to feel the weariness of exhaustion. I was scarcely twenty-five, and had practiced my profession, that of medicine and surgery, for less than three years.

I was robust, full of nervous energy and love for the work I had chosen as my life vocation.

But it happened that in the Spring three wealthy families had given me charge of some very difficult cases in which the lives of well loved members of their families depended upon some rather bold experiments, constant attention, and nerve racking study. Two of these patients, one an elderly man and the other a young lady, had been given up by their regular physicians.

Like all young physicians, I had felt a sense of pride that these difficult cases had been confided to me, and went at them with all the vigor and hope of youth. I bore upon my shoulders a sense of responsibility that older practitioners learn to set aside. My very youth, and the determination of succeed, made me desperate and bold.

I tried the experiments the older heads had advised against. I spent sleepless nights with pencil and paper producing formula after formula. I spent hours in my laboratory testing rare combinations of drugs, some almost unknown and some not yet acknowledged in the field of medicine by the conservatives of my school.

The result of all this, after weeks of the most unremitting toil, was success. My patients got well, and I felt ill. My own attendant, Dr. Thornton, the kind old physician of my family, imperatively forbade all work.

"There's no use, Stagg," he said, as he felt my pulse, looked at my tongue, and shook his gray head sorrowfully. "You've done well for others, but you've nearly killed yourself. Neither your physical being nor your mental powers will stand this strain. You've got to give up for a few months and go away to rest."

"Can't I rest here, doctor?" I asked, "here" being the city of New York, "then I can keep an eye on—"

The old physician snorted. "Rest here! Yes, you can rest in Woodlawn Cemetery if you want to. I was silly enough to argue from the point of view that you had more or less desire to live."

"Live! Of course, I want to live." He waved his hand as if that settled the matter conclusively without further argument.

"Then," he continued, "if you want to live, there is just one way to do it. You must obey orders."

I was lying on the sofa in my library. I closed my eyes and reflected.

It was a bitter thing to think of, giving up just when I had begun to hear my name spoken with respect, just as I was learning to know the sweet fame born of success, but what good would all the success, fame, or anything else do me, if I broke down permanently?

The relaxation from practice did not present any financial difficulties, for I had inherited a small fortune, was alone in the world, and could easily afford to take a rest.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked. "Go off on a hunting trip? Start for Europe?"

"Neither!" came the answer rather explosively. "I want you to rest. I know you and your hunting trips, tramping miles a day after a poor innocent deer, or climbing mountains in pursuit of a miserable, worthless bear. And I know your European trips, shooting from London to Paris, then on to the Mediterranean, to Rome—and bosh! Is that resting?"

"I have known you to prescribe both," I said weakly.

"True. You have known me to prescribe arsenic. Shall I therefore dose you with some, and kill you? Come, Stagg! don't be a fool. I am going to give you the pleasantest prescription I ever gave anybody."

"Go ahead," I said with a smile.

"Something odd, yet something that brings to my mind sweet visions of bucolic pleasures. There is an invigorating tonic in the very air I breathe as I think of it. You have some cousins in Ulster, have you not?"

"Well fixed, keep horses and all that?"

"Yes."

"Fine country round there for riding; no excitement, yet not a trackless wilderness. Fine valley, the Mohawk. Best farms, best milk, good people. Do you begin to see?"

I loved the blue hills that hem in the town in the basin, for so it looks, as if completely surrounded by the tree clad heights of Deerfield, Oriskany, and the Saratoga range on the south.

It did not take long to make arrangements. I wrote James, telling him the circumstances under which I found myself placed, and asked if I would be an unwelcome guest for a few weeks. I received this answer:

"My Dear Arnold:—Your letter could not have come at a less fortunate time as regards making you comfortable, nor a more fortunate one for your purpose of taking a rest. If there is, on the face of the earth, a house where you can find solitude, it is mine at this writing. Emma and the children left me last week for a visit to her father and mother on the farm near Chautauque Lake. I am so infamously busy that I don't seem to have time to eat or sleep. There are four servants in the house getting fat and lazy with nothing to do. There are five horses in the stable eating their heads off. So, if you can stand the bachelor end of it, and you ought to be able to enjoy a Stagg party, come along and welcome."

"I shall enter into no agreement to entertain you, I am too busy. The house is yours, and all that therein is, come any time. Your affectionate cousin,

"JAMES STAGG."

This was just what I wanted, though

down along the Mohawk towards Frankfort. It was a cool day, the air was full of ozone, and I felt that I was already on the road to perfect health. This became my daily practice.

James came home when I had been there three days. We sat up late that evening, smoking and chatting. He inquired into my case. He nodded wisely when I told him what my physician had said.

"The old gentleman knew a thing or two, Arnold," he remarked. "He knew you wanted rest for a tired brain and gentle exercise for a neglected body. The bay horse is just the creature for you. He is powerful enough to carry you anywhere. He is gentle. You can stroll with the bridge on your arm in shady lanes, and he will follow. You can let him graze, and lie on your back and read your favorite authors."

"Go in and win. Forget everything but the object of the moment—rest. I may appear at times somewhat inhospitable, but I assure you I want you to make this place your home as long as you wish. At any rate, you cannot leave before Em comes back, and that will not be much before September, when school opens."

A farmer passed me on the way to the city with some truck.

"My friend," I said, hailing him, "can you tell me where this road leads?"

"That road don't lead nowhere," he replied promptly. "That is, it don't now. Long time ago that road went to Pawmuc Mill. But they ain't no mill now, so they ain't no road."

"Is Pawmuc a town?" I asked.

"Was a hamlet. 'Taint nothin' but a ruin now. They's a church, I believe, whar old Parson Lee preaches to them as comes. You know the Lees?"

"I know scarcely any one. I am visiting my cousin in Ulster, James Stagg."

The bucolic gentleman opened his eyes wide. Then he laughed.

"I reckon he c'd tell ye somethin' about the Lees. Ask him about Bob Forrest. Well, good-day, mister."

He jogged along, and I sat in the saddle a moment looking at the grass-covered road.

The words of the farmer had brought to my mind an imaginary picture. Like those explorers who go thousands of miles from home to poke and dig in ruins of Aztec refuse heaps, I was going to explore a ruin in the heart of Oneida County, one of the most populous counties of New York State.

I did not go for my usual ride. By 9 o'clock it was raining like the deluge, the air was split by blinding flashes of lightning, and volleys of thunder rolled around overhead with a tremendous acoustic effect.

By noon the clouds had passed away, the sun was shining grandly, a cool breeze made the day enjoyable, and the water that had fallen in the morning had been eagerly drunk up by the parched earth.

I could not resist the temptation to ride. I had the bay saddled, got into my riding boots and jacket, and off I went.

The bay was in great form and spirits. We dashed away to Genesee street, and out, out into the fair country beyond. Somewhere between Ulster and Clinton I came across a dimly visible track cutting off through some woods. It was evidently a road that had become overgrown with grass and weeds after discontinuance. From the general appearance I judged that once it had been quite a thoroughfare.

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I looked to see where the bay was, and found him contentedly grazing near the fence, and went inside the church.

Two rows of wooden benches, hard and uncomfortable, covered the auditorium. Two oil lamps hung in brackets at the rear, and two more were placed near the little pulpit.

At one side, in front, was a small organ. I wondered what rustic beauty played sweet harmony on that.

I opened it and soon found that sweet harmony was a thing impossible for a rustic beauty or any other kind to extract from it. I shut the thing with a bang, and stood idly looking around.

I was suddenly conscious of a noise. The sound of footsteps came clearly to my ears. It was evident that a man had sprung up out of the earth. How else could one appear so suddenly?

The man was then on the little porch. He was coming in. He passed a window. I could just see in the increasing dusk that he was heavily bearded, and wore rough clothing. Yet he did not seem like a farmer.

At one side there was a window open. Some strange thought flashed into my mind. A feeling that here, in that quiet church, I was to be treated to some whisperings of the tragedy I had imagined.

I leaped through the window, making no noise, and landed on the soft greenward outside.

No sooner had I effected my retreat than I regretted it. Had I done right, I asked myself, to go out in that fashion and leave the holy edifice at the mercy of a tramp?

Who was the man, that he had business there at that hour? Well, what business had I there?

The bay was still munching away near the fence. I was about to go toward him, when I heard, inside the church, the man's voice.

"Beatrice!" he was calling. "Beatrice, my darling!"

Some rustic lover come to keep a tryst with his rural sweetheart.

I walked toward the front of the church. As I came out beyond the corner, I heard the patter of a small horse's hoofs. A moment later I saw a little steed dash up to the old gate and a woman dismount.

It was by this time too dark for me to tell how old she was, or whether she was plain or handsome. I saw, however, that she wore a neat-fitting riding habit, and that she was closely veiled.

A sting of something like suspicion pricked me. The man was rough looking, the woman evidently well bred. What could they have in common?

Yet, again, what business was this of mine? If they were lovers, it surely was not my province to halt her and ask why she preferred such an uncouth creature to one of her own standing.

Perhaps, I thought, she is a New York girl, or one from some large city, having a flirtation with an impressionable countryman. If so, let him thresh his own oats. It was not my duty to look out for him.

The woman entered the church, and I drew back so that she could not see me. I wondered that neither of them seemed at all alarmed at sight of the bay, which certainly argued the presence of a stranger in or near the church.

Suddenly I heard loud sobbing. Surely this was not the orthodox flirtation of a city girl.

"My darling! Oh, my darling!" I heard the man say, and his voice vibrated with some overwhelming emotion.

The woman sobbed, the man caressed. No name was uttered by either, yet my mind reverted unaccountably to the headline on the monument reading, "Mary, beloved wife of Robert Forrest."

Where were the Lees in this affair, any way? And why was I so interested? Was there a magic influence in that quiet valley that controlled my footsteps, my thoughts, my emotion?

Heavens! The thunder of horses' hoofs beat strong on the grassy road. In the gloom I saw three riders coming full tilt from the direction of one of the large houses I had noticed.

I could hear loud and angry voices. "An elopement spoiled," I said to myself. "But it's too bad if the man is thrashed."

For a moment I stood irresolute. Then, in the distance, I saw and heard another coming like the wind to overtake the first three.

"It's four to one," I muttered. "I'll just give the man a little warning."

I stepped noiselessly inside the church. Enough light still came in through the windows